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SUBJECT: DELEGATION HOLDS BILATERAL TALKS WITH COMOROS

REF: A) ANTANANARIVO 128 (NOTAL) B) 06 STATE 159380

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1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Following up on Assistant Secretary Jendayi Frazer's suggestion to President Ahmed Abdallah Sambi on the sidelines of UNGA last September (REF B), a U.S. delegation led by Director of the Office of East African Affairs Eunice Reddick held the first ever bilateral discussions with the Government of the Union of the Comoros (GOC) April 19. Although the talks consisted mainly of the GOC's "wish list," they were helpful in providing the USG with a better understanding of the Comoros' needs and vision for the future in terms of the economy, energy, education, health, and security. Post strongly recommends the Department take advantage of this window of opportunity to solidify U.S. relations with this emerging Muslim democracy through various forms of assistance. END SUMMARY.

2. (U) On the eve of the talks, Reddick and Ambassador McGee held a brief meeting with President Sambi (septel). He said the Comoros desires U.S. assistance in order to remain in the club of democratic countries and reiterated the GOC's request for military training. In subsequent courtesy calls with both Union Vice Presidents and a number of ministers, GOC officials made it clear that bilateral discussions were a source of encouragement and reassurance. The Vice Presidents identified energy, water, and hospitals as the Comoros' greatest needs and described legislation in the works to attract private investment.

3. (U) Following remarks by U.S. delegation head Eunice Reddick and Comoran Minister of External Relations Jaffar at a brief opening ceremony April 19, the two sides sat down for a series of working-level discussions on the economy and energy, education, health, security, and channels of communication. The talks consisted mainly of "wish list" requests from the Comoran side.

ECONOMY AND ENERGY
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4. (U) The GOC requested U.S. assistance in rehabilitating the country's three main power plants to improve the macroeconomic situation, raise people's living standards, and facilitate good governance; the GOC is seeking USD 4 million to complement the USD 1 million already provided by the Chinese to kick off the project. The U.S. delegation responded that the U.S. company Geothermal Development Associates is considering a feasibility study of

geothermal energy at Mount Karthala later this year.

¶5. (U) The GOC also requested U.S. assistance in establishing a public finance database (already partially funded by the World Bank) and a 90-day survey on the employment situation. The USG delegation noted the possibility of U.S. Department of Treasury interest in the Comoros.

¶6. (U) The U.S. side expressed its advocacy for the World Bank and IMF to lift the Comoros' debt through the Highly Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) and Multilateral Debt Relief Initiative (MDRI). The U.S. delegation also encouraged the GOC to continue working to meet the requirements for both the African Growth and Opportunities Act (AGOA) and the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC). Expressing a keen interest in achieving MCC "threshold" status, the Ministry of Exterior Relations is currently drafting a document clarifying the Comoros' performance on the seventeen indicators.

EDUCATION

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¶7. (U) The GOC requested U.S. assistance in establishing professional training centers and leadership institutes. Ambassador McGee explained that if the U.S.-funded distance education program (USD 274,000) and school reconstruction initiatives currently underway are a success, Washington may consider expanding education programs in the future. (NOTE: The EU is starting up a USD 10 million education program and the Chinese are currently assisting through the construction of primary school classrooms. END NOTE.)

HEALTH

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¶8. (U) The GOC requested assistance in funding an anti-AIDS program and setting up a blood bank. The U.S. side explained that certain

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international organizations may be better equipped to assist the GOC with the technical aspects of these programs. However, Ambassador McGee expressed the hope that if the U.S. civil affairs team's program to rebuild schools is successful, they may look at rehabilitating clinics in the future. On the sidelines of the bilateral talks, PolEcon Chief asked about efforts to fight malaria.

Vice President Ikililou, who is also Health Minister, mentioned a bed net distribution program targeting pregnant women and children under five. He also mentioned the Comoros' participation in the Global Fund, noting implementation problems in the past and the Union Government's expectation that the Comoros will be considered for future participation in the program.

SECURITY

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¶9. (U) The GOC requested support in purchasing marine patrol craft, establishing biometric passport and national identity card systems, procuring x-ray machines to screen passengers and cargo, and training personnel in the use of such equipment. Reiterating that security is one of the most important aspects of our bilateral relationship, the U.S. delegation encouraged the GOC to partner with other countries in the region to pool resources for greater overall security. They also encouraged Comoran representatives to attend the upcoming Regional Maritime Security Conference to be held in Mozambique.

CHANNELS OF COMMUNICATION

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¶10. (U) The GOC welcomed the establishment of a full-time local-hire U.S. Embassy representative in Moroni to facilitate communication. Given recent domestic political tension, Ambassador McGee stated the U.S. will work primarily with the Union government on all bilateral matters - a statement welcomed by Union GOC officials.

GENERAL TAKEAWAYS

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¶11. (U) The U.S. delegation expressed appreciation for its deeper understanding of the Comoros' needs and the GOC's vision. The U.S. Embassy in Madagascar will be better equipped to coordinate with other donors to creatively address these needs, whether through international organizations, direct technical assistance, or private sector partners. The GOC expressed its appreciation for the U.S. delegation's frankness and partnership. The two sides ended the talks with a joint communique reaffirming the mutual desire to reinvigorate the bilateral relationship (informal translation below).

COMMENT
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¶12. (SBU) Emerging from a turbulent political past, the Comoros is eagerly courting a relationship with the U.S. While France, China, and Middle Eastern countries are active in the Comoros, GOC officials appreciate their relationship with the U.S. as a counterbalance promising a certain degree of stability and international credibility. Especially in light of the GOC's cooperation in counterterrorism and shutting down the al-Haramain charity, Post strongly reiterates its recommendation (REF A) that the Department take advantage of this window of opportunity to provide this moderate Muslim democracy with greater assistance. END COMMENT.

START TEXT OF JOINT COMMUNIQUE
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Pursuant to meetings held in New York in September 2006 between the President of the Union of the Comoros, His Excellency Mr. AHMED ABDALLAH MOHAMED SAMBI and the Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, Her Excellency Mrs. Jendayi FRAZER, related to the strengthening of the relationship between both countries, a Mixed Commission meeting took place in Moroni on April 19, 2007.

This Mixed Commission, the first since the establishment of the relationship between the United States of America and the Union of the Comoros, is of crucial importance for both countries, as it symbolizes a new era in the common willingness to reenergize bilateral cooperation.

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The U.S. delegation was led by Her Excellency Mrs. Eunice S. REDDICK, Director of the Office of East African Affairs within the State Department, and included the following members (see appendix).

The Comoran party was led by His Excellency Mr. Ahmed Ben Said JAFFAR, Minister of External Relations and Cooperation, and included the following members (see appendix).

The Vice-President in charge of the Ministry of Transport, Post and Telecommunications and Tourism, His Excellency Mr. IDI NADHOIM, and the Vice-President in Charge of the Ministry of Health, Solidarity and the Promotion of Gender, His Excellency Mr. Ikililou DHOININE, attended the official opening and closing ceremonies of this Mixed Commission.

Minister Ahmed Ben Said JAFFAR officially opened the talks.

Both parties jointly chose the following topics of discussion:

- Finance, Energy, and Economy
- Education
- Health
- Security and
- Communication

During the technical discussions that took place, the representatives of the various departments mentioned presented the situation in their respective field and stated their needs.

These presentations enabled better understanding of the situation in

each field and the definition of the actions needed to support them.

Following the talks, both parties reaffirmed their common willingness to strengthen bilateral cooperation in the realms of social and economic development and national security.

The U.S. party expressed its satisfaction with the Union of the Comoros' commitment to peace and stability, democracy and good governance, and the fight against terrorism for the sake of sustainable development.

Regarding the different projects presented, the U.S. party expressed its desire to enhance those programs already underway.

Both parties also expressed the desire to deepen the friendship and cooperation binding them and to provide mutual support.

The high-level meetings, as well as technical working sessions, took place in a warm and friendly atmosphere, and in a climate of full understanding.

END TEXT.

MCGEE